

Designing Informational Handouts

Planning and preparing: Putting your handout in context

Step 1: Identify your audience.

Ask yourself the following questions about your audience:

- What is their interest in the topic of your handout?
- What do they already know about the topic?
- How will they use the new information you provide?
- Where else might they look for information on this topic?
- What level of detail do they need on this topic?

Step 2: Determine the goals of the handout.

What do you expect the handout to accomplish? Here are some sample goals:

- Educate your audience on a particular topic.
- Change the attitudes, opinions, or actions of your audience.
- Encourage attendance at a particular program or event.
- Provide materials for future reference.
- Offer links and resources for further information and research.

Step 3: Decide how to distribute the handout.

How will your audience receive this handout? Here are some potential outlets:

- In person during a program or event.
- Using a literature rack in an office or high-traffic area.
- Posted online or sent electronically.
- Included in a packet of other related materials.

Step 4: Consider potential uses.

What will your audience do with the handout? Here are some scenarios:

- Read it and share it with others.
- File it away for future reference.
- Post it on the refrigerator at home.
- Throw it away.

Why is this important?

In order to design an effective handout, you need to understand who will be using it, how you will get it to them, and what they will do with it after they receive it. And most importantly, based on all of these questions, you need to decide what you need the handout to accomplish so that you can design it to meet these criteria.

Designing Informational Handouts

Identifying essential content

Step 1: Plan your content.

- Based on what you know about your audience and the topic, what do you need to include in your handout?
- What is the best way to organize the information?
Chronologically, topically, spatially, etc.
- What level of detail do you need to include?
- How much space/time do you have to make your key points?

Step 2: Edit your content.

- Use spell-check and grammar-check tools.
- Have others review and proofread your text.
If possible, have someone from your audience review it.
- Check for clarity, consistency, and accuracy.
- Eliminate unnecessary and redundant text, and edit for length and space.
- Use only one space after each period to eliminate “rivers of whitespace” in large blocks of text. (Use the Find and Replace tool to save time.)

Step 3: Identify design elements.

- Determine size and format of the handout.
Tri-fold brochure, half-sheet handout, 8.5” x 11” flyer, 11” x 17” poster, etc.
- Select appropriate photos and graphics to illustrate your content.
- Determine if any logos or official graphics need to be incorporated.
- Consider how the document will be produced.
- If it will be printed in color, look for strong colors and photos.
- If it will be printed in black and white and photocopied, choose images that look good in black and white and have contrast.

General content tips

- Use active language and action verbs, not passive language.
Example: The event will be hosted by the Tippecanoe County Office. (Passive voice.)
The Tippecanoe County Office will host a workshop on [insert topic]. (Active voice.)
- Use short phrases and bullet points when possible.
- Avoid acronyms, abbreviations, and jargon.
- Tailor your content and writing style to your audience.

Designing Informational Handouts

Basic design principles

Contrast = Make important things stand out.

- Contrast creates interest and draws the reader's eye to important elements.
- Contrast succeeds when two elements of the design are very different (in size, color, thickness, spacing, etc.).
- Each layout needs one clearly dominant element like a photo or headline.
- Use colors, spacing, and size to highlight important elements.
- Examples of contrast include:
 - Reverse text (white text on a black background)
 - Font sizes (a 48 pt headline and 12 pt body text)
 - Thick and thin lines (a 5 pt line and a 0.5 pt line)

Repetition = Be consistent.

- Repetition creates a unified look and feel to a design.
- Use consistent elements like line styles, headlines, colors, and fonts.
- Choose an element or two to repeat.
- Examples: Make all headlines the same font, size, and bolded. Layout the text in two columns on each page. Make all lines 2 pt weight and blue.
- When creating multiple handouts on the same topic or for the same audience, repeat styles, logos, and images for a coherent package.

Alignment = Give the eye clear lines to follow.

- Alignment connects elements to one another in a layout, and gives the eye clear lines to follow, making it easier to scan and find information quickly.
- Don't center everything arbitrarily. Documents are much easier to read with a strong left alignment. Use on-screen rulers and guides to line elements up.
- Use different alignments (tabs and indentations) to designate hierarchy and to align similar information.

Proximity = Group similar information.

- Proximity makes it easier for readers to find information by putting similar information close together on the page.
- Examples of information to group include: contact information (name, phone number, e-mail); event details (date, time, location); and image information (graphic and caption).

Designing Informational Handouts

Use of graphics

How to find quality images

- Graphics and images reflect credibility, so it's important to have professional-looking images that reflect your content.
- When possible use photographs and avoid generic clipart.
- Search Microsoft Clip Art for "Photographs" only.
- If appropriate, take your own images using a digital camera.
- Example: If you're referring to your location, include a photo of your building.
- Beware of Google images and searching for images online—many are protected by copyright.
- If budget allows, use stock photography services like istockphoto.com or fotolia.com. If budget does not allow, try searching on Flickr.com for images with a Creative Commons license that allows others to use them.
- Most Microsoft programs will let you crop, rotate, resize, and change the color of images without needing an advanced photo editing program.

File types and formats

There are many types of image file types and formats. Here are a few:

- JPEG (.jpg) files are good for print materials and everyday use.
- TIFF (.tiff) and EPS (.eps) files are usually higher resolution and higher quality, and are good for professional printing and logos.
- GIF (.gif) files are smaller in size and are good for use on websites.

Images can also be different resolutions, which refers to how many dots or pixels per inch an image has and what level of detail can be printed.

- 300 dpi (dots per inch) is a professional printer-quality resolution
- 120 dpi is an average resolution that is good for everyday printing
- 72 dpi is a standard resolution for online images, which makes the image smaller and the quality lower for printing

Informational graphics

- Charts, graphs, and diagrams are great ways to illustrate content.
- Keep formatting and color schemes simple.
- Delete unnecessary lines, grids, or labels on graphs for a clear display.
- Use arrows, flow charts, and other shapes to create diagrams electronically.
- If using a chart or diagram from another source, make sure you give credit.

Designing Informational Handouts

Production, reproduction, and distribution

Producing your materials

- Based on budget, quantity needed, and available equipment, determine if the handout will be produced:
- In color or black and white.
- Professionally or in-house using a desktop printer or photocopier.
- If it will be produced in black and white:
- Consider using colored paper to add interest.
- Design the handout in black and white initially.
- If it will be produced by a professional printer:
- Provide the printer with all text, images, and design files you have.
- Review at least one proof of the project before it is printed.

Reproducing materials

- If producing a handout professionally, the printer can usually store your files for reprints in the future.
- If producing a handout in-house and photocopying it, do not use shading, subtle colors, intricate graphics, or background graphics without testing to make sure they appear in the photocopied version.

Distributing materials online or electronically

- When posting handouts online, use the PDF (.pdf) format. Do not put Word documents or Publisher files online if possible because not all users will have access to Microsoft Office to open those files.
- Add active hyperlinks (example: <http://www.purdue.edu>) to documents to refer people to more information, or to provide contact information like an email address.
- Include text in the header or footer of the handout indicating when the document was last updated.
- Use a descriptive filename (example: InformationalHandoutDesign.pdf) and do not use spaces or special characters in the filename.
- Test your handout to make sure all graphics display the way they are supposed to in the PDF format.

References:

Blakesley, David, and Hoogeveen, Jeffrey. *The Thomson Handbook*. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2008.

Williams, Robin. *The Non-Designer's Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice*. Pearson Education: 1994.